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Self-Publish or Perish!

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make sure things are spelled right and typos haven’t crept in. Some writers find line editing and copyediting intrusive. I’ve always found editing relatively easy: I usually 20+ books and 500+ articles to my credit, I believe my words can always be improved.

Your book will be professionally designed and typeset — which might mean it will have a more polished look than you’d get through self-publishing, although that’s not a given.

You’ll benefit from a professional cover design — at least most of the time. Look at the cover of The Librarian’s Guide to Micropublishing: I believe it’s a great concept carried out superbly by a first-rate cover designer. I could not have done nearly as well.

The publisher will market your book — which involves knowing who should get review copies and sending them out, inclusion in the right catalogs, approval plans if you’re lucky, ad mailings in some cases, and all the rest. (The publisher will also handle printing, binding and order fulfillment — but so do Lulu and CreateSpace.)

For me, the primary advantage of traditional publishing is that last one (although good covers are also nice). It’s the reason I’m likely to turn to a traditional publisher if I can make the case that the book will sell well enough and if I can tolerate the delay in getting the book to market.

Self-Publish or Perish!

by John D. Riley (Regional Sales Representative, Busca, Inc.) <jdriley@comcast.net> www.buscainc.com

What is so great about getting published by a mainstream publisher? First of all, you have to locate a literary agent; or they won’t even look at your manuscript. No more “over the transom” surprise blockbusters. Plus locating a literary agent is almost as hard as finding a publisher once was. Perhaps publishers are wary of looking at your book for fear of a law suit if they publish something similar in the future, or they might just feel inundated with stuff and want the books vetted by someone in the industry. Did I say industry? Publishing is first and foremost a business, and your book will be looked at only if it has commercial potential.

Once your Great American Novel or History of Bean Sprout Farming is finally released, your publisher will love you for about a week before focusing attention on the “Next Big Thing.” Mark Pendergrast, a former academic acquisition librarian and acquaintance, wrote a fascinating social history of Coca Cola entitled For God, Country, and Coca Cola. His publisher dutifully put it in their seasonal catalogue, sent out review copies to the trade, and had their reps show the book to bookstore buyers while on their rounds. After that week-long blitz, he was on his own. His publisher had moved on to promote the next book in its list. Mark tried visiting bookstores to promote his book at his own expense. He even had to buy copies of his book to show to prospective buyers. His profit per book sold was under a dollar. If you get a chance, buy a copy. It’s a great read, and he even gives away the “secret formula” for Coke (hint: it involves neroli oil).

Another drawback to publishing with a commercial publisher is that they own the copyright to your book until it goes out-of-print, but o.p. is actually a thing of the past as print-on-demand will give your publisher indefinite rights. But if you self-publish, you retain all rights to your book. Another consideration is commercial publishers generally will not issue simultaneous print and e-versions of your book, but you can.

Bob Holley, the editor of this special Against the Grain segment, asked me to recount my experiences as a self-published author. I published my first book in 2004, Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops. I distilled my forty years of work in bookstores and libraries into a series of short stories. Fiction gave me the freedom to encapsulate many different experiences and speculations in one narrative. I found it much more fun and creative than a straightforward history or autobiography. Writing fiction was a new experience for me, and I really took to it with zeal. I also found that writing on a word processor was liberating, much in the way that digital photography allows you to try many angles and points of view before you commit to print. I have since written three books of fiction (with another one in progress).

I fell into self-publishing almost by accident. I might have remained one of those frustrated writers who wallpaper their homes with rejection slips from commercial publishers and agents. Fortunately it turned out...
that part of my marketing responsibilities as a vendor required me to frequently bring print jobs to Collective Copies in Florence, Massachusetts. They are a worker-owned collective that does excellent printing and copying work. On one visit, I noticed that they were printing and marketing books for their customers. So when I approached Steve Strimer with my clutch of stories, he was ready to work with me. I had already delivered my manuscript to Toni Brannhill, a friend, as well as writer, book editor, and one time legal counsel for the Writers’ Guild. She was kind enough to read my manuscript and saved me from inflicting some real howlers on my unsuspecting readers. I then handed off the edited manuscript on a flash drive to Collective Copies. They took care of all of the formatting and printing. From drop off to finished product was less than two weeks. Steve had chosen some beautiful paper (Mohawk Vellum Cream); the typeface looked great too (Bembo). I was now the proud father of fifty handsome copies of my little book. Anytime I needed more copies, I could order them in twenty-five copy increments. The texts were stored on the print shop computer and could be printed “on demand.” I also kept back up files on a CD.

When I self-published with Collective Copies, I was responsible for my own editing and cover art; but Toni had volunteered to be my editor. I also produced my own cover by using public domain art. With all that work done, the final cost to publish each book of ninety pages was under five dollars. For around two hundred and fifty dollars, I now owned fifty copies of an imminently block buster. Collective Copies placed it in their three shops, an excellent beginning as they are popular haunts of the Five College Area academic community. Additionally, I had sold it to the four new bookshops in the area and mailed review copies to St. Mark’s Bookshop in the East Village in Manhattan, which graciously carried it (and sold nearly thirty copies). I also placed it in some willing used bookstores where it sold very well to other book dealers and librarians. They found it to be both a fun read as well as a truthful representation of the used book business and library world.

My best advice when self-publishing is to aim for a core audience. If your book is non-fiction, you probably already have a built in audience to focus on. If you are publishing fiction, poetry, or children’s books, you will have a harder time finding your audience. Since my fiction book dealt mainly with bookshops and libraries, I already had a focus audience where it sold well through word of mouth. I had a funny experience in a local library when I heard the librarian recount how a friend had given her a copy of Else Fine when she was recovering from cancer. She had found the title and subject matter apropos to her profession as well as to her state of health.

I published my books several years ago (2004, 2006, and 2010 with more to come in the future). The self-publishing world has changed drastically in just that short period. I published first in print and then a few years later made digital copies available through Amazon Kindle. Collective Copies charged me two hundred dollars to format the three books for upload to Kindle. Nowadays I would recommend that self-published authors go directly to digital and provide a print option for those who want it. What has changed most is that you can now publish direct to digital with many companies and then have them make print-on-demand copies available for the print market. With Amazon, you can publish for free on Kindle Direct and then have them create a print copy for sale on the Amazon Website through their CreateSpace subsidiary. Publishing a book is as easy as creating a Word file and uploading it according to their specifications. However easy Amazon makes the whole process, you are still limited to their proprietary Kindle service. Other companies, such as Lulu and Smashwords, will make your book available simultaneously on all devices from Nook to Apple to Kindle.

Another bit of advice is to not invest too heavily in all the add on services that self-publishing companies offer. Just like a new car dealership, they make most of their money on expensive options. Do your own editing. Get an artist friend to create your cover. Make sure the cover has high impact as it will usually be displayed as a thumbnail picture online.

Use all types of social media to introduce and promote your book. Make a YouTube video where you read and talk about your book. Make it short: two minutes is good. Set up a Facebook page for your book. Create a blog and Website for your book. Get friends and colleagues to review your book on Amazon. Donate free copies to your local libraries.

It’s not that there are too many self-published books or that they are inherently of a lesser quality. The problem with self-published books is that most people try to write a best-seller. Leave that to Grisham, Cornwell, etc. Write on a topic you know and care about. That is how you will find readers. Plus commercial publishers might find you after you have self-published and established a “platform” of readers.

More advice to aspiring authors: Make sure you like your own writing. Write first for yourself. Your knowledge and enthusiasm will translate into a fresh experience for others. Writer Cyril Connolly said: “Better to write for yourself and have no public than to write for the public and have no self.” Remember that J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac were rejected hundreds of times before they were published and that Virginia Woolf, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner were all self-published authors at one time. Relish your inner artist. Become immortal. Self-publish!

For further reading:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YL9cheauX4w

My books:

Else Fine: Little Tales of Horror from Libraries and Bookshops (2004; Print and Kindle editions)
The Parrot’s Tale (2006; Print and Kindle editions)
Superpostapocalypticxpiadalicious (2010; Print and Kindle Editions)
The Mighty Charleston Players Present Their Greatest Hits 2007-2012:Written with Eleanor Cook (2012; Available from Busca, Inc. and Amazon)

Walking tour of the College of Charleston that I did many years ago with Patrick Squires, Azaleas and Stucco. Of course, it’s totally outdated now and long out of print.

One of our colleagues at the College of Charleston, Jolanda-Pieta van Arnhem and Jerry Spiller have just published a paper, “Let’s Not Meet: Making the Most of Time with Asynchronous Collaboration,” in Time and Project Management Strategies for Librarians edited by Carol Smallwood; Jason Kuhl; & Lisa Fraser and just out from Scarecrow Press. Joey (that’s Jolanda’s real name) is getting ready to finish her library degree at the University of South Carolina which she has managed to do while holding down three full-time jobs! Hooray for Joey and Congratulations! PS Jerry already has an MLIS!

More congratulations are due as well to Lindsay Barnett who recently joined the staff of Technical Services at the Addlestone Library. Lindsay just graduated from Library School in May! And she has been working for us for the past year. Great having so many new library school graduates for us old codgers to learn from! Lindsay plans to start continued on page 24